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ABSTRACT

When newly trained special education teachers begin working with infants and young children in early intervention programs, they find themselves also having to work extensively with parents. Teachers may expect all parents to become partners with them in teaching their children, and teachers often become upset or frustrated when parents fail to perform according to the teachers' expectations. Teachers frequently blame themselves or the parents for failing in their duties. To reduce this stressful situation, teachers need to consider the amount and kinds of pressures and problems that individual parents face and to design programs that will meet parents' needs. For parents experiencing a great deal of stress, it may be necessary to provide more activities geared to parental support needs, such as field trips, as well as educational programs geared toward their children. Once a variety of program activities geared to parental support and involvement in children's education are offered, parents can select the activities in which they are interested and in which they feel ready to participate. Neither teachers nor parents need to feel any failure if parents participate only in support activities. Rather, both teachers and parents can feel successful. The feeling of success results in stress reduction, which benefits the children involved. (MDM)

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REDUCING STAFF STRESS/BURNOUT BY CHANGING STAFF EXPECTATIONS IN DEALING WITH PARENTS

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Running Head: REDUCING STAFF STRESS

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ABSTRACT

In designing program offerings for parent involvement, it is important to consider the amount and kinds of risks/problems the parent is experiencing, and the range and the types of program activities that might meet the parent's needs. If a center has a large percentage of parents who are experiencing a large number of stresses/problems, that program needs to offer an extra large number of parent involvement activities that are geared to parental support needs as well as some educational programs and perhaps a few leadership activities. On the other hand, if a center has a large percentage of parents who are ready for educational program activities, then more activities would be offered for that level, while just a few activities would be available for leadership and for support. Once a variety of program activities geared to support and education are offered, parents can self select "without guild" the activities they are interested in and ready for. Some parents may select activities that staff don't feel they are ready for, but staff expectations would not be as high. Neither the teachers nor parents need to feel a failure if parents only go on trips (support activity) and do not volunteer in the classroom (educational activity). Both teachers and parents feel successful, stress is reduced and this cannot help but benefit the children.

REDUCING STAFF STRESS/BURNOUT BY CHANGING STAFF EXPECTATIONS IN DEALING WITH PARENTS

Early Childhood Special Educators are in the helping profession because they want to work with young children. Their training is geared toward working with the young child. They expect that parents will work with them as partners to develop the child's full potential. When newly trained teachers begin working in 0-3 early intervention programs, they find themselves having to work extensively with parents as well as young children. These new teachers may expect all their parents to be partners with them in teaching the children. They may find, however, that some or many of their parents do not show up for parent meetings, are not available for home visits, don't open the door when the home visiting teacher arrives, or don't help out in the classroom. They don't follow through on the activities they are supposed to "teach" their children. These teachers often then become upset and experience a great deal of stress because they feel that they are failing as teachers because the parents "should" be helping and teaching their children. They may also blame the parent as being a bad parent.

EFFECTS OF STRESS ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT

To reduce stress, what is needed for teachers is to have a

concept of the stress that parents are under and how that effects them so that their expectations for themselves and their parents are more realistic. They need to understand that parents are individuals like their children. They have different levels of understanding, acceptance, knowledge, skills, strengths, limitations, needs, and wants. Some parents want the types of program activities that early intervention programs are offering and become actively involved int he program. Some parents do not become involved in the parent activities because the activities re not geared to their needs. The teacher needs to develop programs that the parent can do so that both teacher and parent can feel successful.

A research survey conducted by Landerholm/Karr, 1988, found that most programs tend to gear parent involvement program activities to parents receiving information about their children or teaching their children, i.e., educational activities. Very few programs gear their activities to parents' needs for support. Particularly with parents of handicapped infants, many parents in early intervention programs are going through the grieving process and may need a great deal of support with their own needs before they can go on to focusing on the needs of their handicapped infants. These parents may be unable to teach their children or receive information on the handicapping conditions of their children until they first receive some support and help in dealing with their own feelings.

According to Ramey, Beckman-Bell, and Gowen (1980), staff need to be sensitive to both the stresses and strengths of families: The task in working with parents is to take into account the stress that they may be under and strive not to add to it while at the same time taking advantage of the unique contribution that parents can make in facilitating their child's development (Ramey et al, 1980, p. 80).

Programs must meet the needs of the parents they serve rather than demand that the parents meet the needs of the program. Efforts must be made by program staff to assess the entire family. A match between parent needs and involvement opportunities increases the possibility that the parent will become actively involved in the program. And the parent's active involvement in the program will increase the likelihood that the child will experience positive growth and development while being served by the program.

In addition to going through the grieving process, parents may be experiencing a number of other problems/risks. The greater the number of risks/problems, the greater the likelihood that the parent will need support type activities from the child's program staff (Bernstein, 1985; Honig, 1984; Badger, 1981). A parent with many problems to cope with is at risk of not being able to function in their role of parent: helping the child to develop to his fullest potential. If parents are worrying about being evicted or having food to eat, they can't worry to the same extent about the

child's delay.

Stresses/risks may be related to the child; such as a difficult temperament or handicap, (Beckman-Bell, 1976, Wikler, 1981), their environment; such as low socio-economic status, (Rabkin & Streuning, 1976, Wikler, 1981, Landerholm, 1982), or to the parent; to personality characteristics such as poor frustration tolerance, parental history of maltreatment, high levels of aggression and anger, Cicchetti, 1987).

Having a high number of stresses or risks can effect the ability of a parent to function and especially for that parent to nurture their children. A high number of risks, stresses, can therefore effect the development of the child (Jeremy and Bernstein, 1982, Honig, 1984, Badger, 1981). Having support (e.g. help from friends and family) and resources (financial resources, personal resources) deduces stress (Bristol, 1979, Zeitlin, Williamson & Rosenblatt, 1985, Dyson & Fewell, 1986, Gabel & Kotsch, 1981). Multi-risk families often have high levels of stress (environment, parent and child) and low levels of support such as isolation, few friends, no phone, no transportation, lack of work (Cicchetti, 1987, Breitmayer & Ramey, 1982). Intervention programs with multi-risk families, according to Cicchetti, (1987), need to work on reducing the family's risks/stresses while increasing protective and buffer factors (e.g. improvement in finances, work, child in school or daycare, marital harmony, social support network). It seems that early intervention programs with

a large percentage of multi-risk families would need to initially provide more support type parent involvement program activities to deal with economic, housing and food issues to help build a support network. later, educational and leadership activities would be beneficial.

Often staff don't feel that their job is to provide support. Therefore, when they spend the whole hour of the home visit listening to the parent's problems, they feel they did not do their "teaching" job. They feel frustrated and unsuccessful. If staff know that their first task is to provide support and help reduce stress working with parents, then they can feel successful if they "just listened." Even if they want to visit and didn't get in the door, in that case just going to the house gave a message to the parent that someone cared enough to come out. If the teacher sees "just going" as important, she will feel less stress that she did not get in the door or complete the home visit. She has accomplished the first step which is to go to the house.

MATCHING PARENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES TO THE NEEDS OF THE PARENTS

Programs must meet the needs of the parents they serve rather than demand that the parents meet the needs of the program. A match between parent needs and involvement opportunities increases the possibility that the parent will become actively involved in the program. And the parent's active involvement in the program will increase the likelihood that the child will experience positive growth and development while being served by the program.

If a program is offering educational activities for the parent

involvement component of the early intervention program, and the majority of the parents feel a need for these types of activities, then they attend the programs, participate actively and give support to the teachers by coming to the programs, telling the teacher how great the programs are, how much they have learned and how much their teaching has helped their children. This feedback helps the teacher. She feels that she has achieved results. She has been successful. She is a "good" helper. The parents interested in leadership activities also help out in the classroom, bring materials, and generally give help and support to the teachers and the center. If the majority of the parents want an educational program, then the educational program activities work, the teacher feels successful and the stress is minimal.

However, if the majority of parents in the early intervention program are at risk, i.e., they have a great deal of stress -- low income, large number of children, single parents, two working parent families, teenage parents, some or few resources, etc. -- then these parents all need support from the staff. Then many of the parents don't attend educational programs, don't call when they are not coming, get angry at the staff for anything or everything, don't volunteer in the classroom, aren't interested in teaching their children, don't follow up on activities, and don't provide leadership and support for the staff. The greater the number of these high risk parents the staff is dealing with, the greater the stress or burden on the staff, who is trying to service the

children's needs. How can the staff facilitate the parents' needs for support while still working with the children? Sometimes programs are already providing support programs for parents, but feel these activities are not really parent involvement program activities. They feel guilty because they are spending too much time just talking instead of teaching the parent how to teach the child. They feel that the person who is riding the bus with the parents is just wasting her time. Often, however, the parent might talk about feelings with the bus aide, or the bus driver and not with anyone else in the center. So if the staff thought about a bus aide or driver as providing a program and included that person in on the staffing, the bus aide could provide information that no one else has.

The teacher who goes to visit a parent 10 times and does not get in the door, feels that she has not provided any program. But the parent may begin to feel trust just because the person did not give up on her and is still coming.

Parents who are under the most stress are often the most difficult to deal with because they do not give staff support and feedback. If a center has a large percentage of multiproblem parents, it is important for staff to give each other support, "You did a terrific job because you just went to Mrs. Jones' house!" Staff also need to give themselves support, instead of criticizing themselves. "Give yourself a pat on the back." If Mrs. Jones comes on a field trip, instead of saying she's an awful parent

because she only comes on a field trip, the teacher says, "It's great that you came on the field trip! I'm so happy you came, Mrs. Jones." By changing expectations to smaller goals, staff is able to work in difficult situations without experiencing so much stress.

Thus, if teachers are working with a large number of parents who are under a great deal of stress, providing support activities that reduce stress (such as providing childcare for parent meetings, providing transportation, helping parents fill out welfare forms, etc.) or that provide nurture (food, fun, recreation, resources, recognition, free prizes) helps build rapport or trust. Often, as parents come to terms with the grieving process and have felt supported by the staff, they can go on to support the staff. All people have times in their lives when they need support and times when they can give support. In addition, when parents feel nurtured by the school program, and are relieved of some of their stresses, they will have more energy to help their children and help the school.

ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS TO REDUCE STRESS

What does the teacher do to manage her own stress while the parents still need a great deal of support and are not providing her any support? In addition to matching support activities to parents needs so teachers can feel success, providing small goals, and recording small successes for the parent and the teacher, the teacher can also look for something the parent is already doing

(smiling at the child, smiling at the teacher), that she may not have noticed and give herself and the parent credit for some small progress toward success. The teacher could also look for something the program is already doing (such as providing breakfast for child and parent thus reducing some financial stress), and give herself and the program some credit for successful parent involvement. The teacher could suggest some "good to myself" activities for herself or the parent such as take a bubble bath, listen to some music, talk on the phone to a friend to help reduce both of their stresses. The teacher could look for evidence of success, rather than waiting for the parent to say the words. For example, the parents did not say they liked the activity, but they smiled, they did the activity, they came the next time, etc. The teacher could give herself positive self talk such as "I was really terrific, I said hello to Mrs. Jones today." Rather than negative self talk, "I was not able to get Mrs. Jones to attend the evening meeting." The teacher could organize exercise or Yoga classes for teachers and parents to help them relax and reduce stress. One program for battered women found that after they started an exercise class, the women felt better and started to attend counseling which they had refused to do before. Finally, teachers can organize their own support group to give each other support, maybe diet and exercise together and do recreational activities.

In summary, many studies have looked at the stress on the special educator of the behavior of the children she works with,

but few studies have looked at the stress on the teacher of dealing with the parents and the children. In the older grades, parental contact with the school system diminishes. However, the early childhood special educator, especially those educators who work in a home based program, working with the parent and the child is part of the job, thus doubling the number of clients. In addition, the teacher has generally not been trained to work with the parent but rather to work with the child.

Parents, too, are under stress. Again, the higher number of stresses that parents are experiencing and the lower their resources, the poorer strategies they may use to cope. Thus, difficult parents add stress to teachers' lives, teachers who are coping poorly add stress back to parents' lives. Conversely, parents who are coping well with their own stresses can offer support to teachers.

In order to reduce stress, teachers can provide their own support groups, use positive self talk, give themselves "good for myself" activities, look for success, and change their expectations. They can design program offerings for parent involvement by considering the amount and kinds of risks/problems the parent is experiencing, and the range and the types of program activities that might meet the parent's needs. If a center has a large percentage of parents who are experiencing a large number of stresses/problems, that program needs to offer an extra large number of parent involvement activities that are geared to parental

support needs as well as some educational programs and perhaps a few leadership activities. On the other hand, if a center has a large percentage of parents who are ready for educational program activities, then more educational activities would be offered and a few support and leadership activities. Once a variety of program activities geared to support and education are offered, parents can self select "without guilt" the activities they are interested in and ready for. Some parents may select activities that staff don't feel they are ready for, but staff expectations would not be as high. Neither the teachers nor parents need to feel a failure if parents only go on trips (support activity) and do not volunteer in the classroom (educational activity). Both teachers and parents feel successful, stress is reduced and this cannot help but benefit the children.

TABLE I

PARENT INVOLVEMENT PROGRAM ACTIVITIES:

PARENT SUPPORT ACTIVITIES:

1. Home visits to help parents with their problems.
2. Field trips for parents' information/services.
3. Bus picks up parent for program.
4. Bus takes parent/child for services.
5. Bus aide helps family get on the bus.
6. Daily/weekly breakfast/lunch provided for parents/children.
7. Coffee/cookies get together for parents
8. Parent support group (staff leader).
9. Special events for families.
10. Parent attends program with child (required).
11. Potluck dinners/picnics for families.
12. Holiday programs for families.
13. Center organized car pool for parents.
14. Field trips for parents' recreation.
15. Movies, plays, performances for families.
16. Softball games for families.
17. Parent lounge area for informal chats with each other.
18. parent Support Group with parent leader.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM ACTIVITIES:

1. Teacher requests parent to teach child at home.
2. Home visits to demonstrate teaching.
3. Parent attends center to observe child.
4. Parent educational group meetings on handicapping conditions.
5. Flyers sent out to parents on events.
6. Parental educational group meetings on discipline/child rearing.
7. Newsletter to parents.
8. Notebooks sent home with notes on the child.
9. Program provided parent/child interaction time.
10. Bulletin boards for parents.
11. Achievement Awards/Graduation Programs for families

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP ACTIVITIES:

1. Programs for parents to support other parents.
2. Provide space and technical assistance for parent groups.
3. Parents volunteer to go on children's field trips.
4. Parent workshops on how to effect legislation.
5. Parents make materials/snacks for the classroom.
6. Post meetings for parent groups.
7. Display brochures of parent groups.
8. Parents teach children in classroom.
9. Planning committees for parents.
10. Programs for parents to teach parents.
11. Fund raisers organized and carried out by parents.

TABLE II

TIPS FOR TEACHERS TO REDUCE STRESS AND FEEL SUCCESSFUL:

1. Teachers need to look at parents' needs - match program activities to their needs by providing support activities rather than adding stress.

2. Change expectations, be happy if the parent comes to school.

3. Provide small goals, breakdown the task, record small successes for the parent and the teacher.

4. Provide own support, don't expect it from the parent. Organize a teachers support group.

5. Set up exercise and diet group activities for parent and teachers.

6. Use positive self talk.

7. Look for evidence of success (rather than waiting for the words). The parent did not say they liked the activity, but they smiled, they did the activity, they came the next time, etc.

8. Look for something the parent is already doing.

9. Look for something the program is already doing (like providing breakfast for children and parents).

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